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RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 1838
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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 6624
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 7552
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 4869
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 9997
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT PRIORITY 2364
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA PRIORITY 0880
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 3226
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI PRIORITY 3986
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 000115

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: NGO HOSTS POL PARTIES ON THE QT TO DISCUSS
DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

REF: ISLAMABAD 12265

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Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Summary: On December 22, The Asia Foundation's Pakistan office convened a multiparty dialogue to discuss how political parties can assist democratic development with the goal of making some concrete recommendations ahead of upcoming parliamentary elections. The session was meant to be low profile, and although high-level participants from Pakistan's major mainstream parties attended, there was no media coverage of the event. Participants deemed the event a success. They also agreed to meet again to continue the dialogue. The Asia Foundation has high hopes, especially given President Musharraf's support of the process. At the moment, the dialogue is filling a hole left by Pakistan's Election Commission, which has not yet convened the parties for any substantive engagement on what preparations should be made to help ensure a transparent election process. End Summary.

Political Party Officials Discuss Democracy...Together

¶2. (C) On December 22, The Asia Foundation's Pakistan office convened the first of what it hopes will be a series of multiparty dialogues to discuss what political parties can do to assist democratic development. Organizers initiated the process by posing strategic questions to generate discussion on Pakistan's weak institutions. One of the goals of the meeting was to use the dialogue to make concrete recommendations to help improve the prospects for more transparent parliamentary elections.

¶3. (C) High-level participants from Pakistan's major mainstream parties attended, including the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML) Secretary General Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed, ruling coalition member Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) Minister of Ports and Shipping Babar Khan Ghauri, opposition Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) former Minister of Finance Senator Sartaj Aziz, and opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Secretary General Raja Pervez Ashraf.

¶4. (C) The three-and-a-half hour session -- that received no media coverage -- focused on two topics: (1) What does "free and fair" mean in terms of elections? and (2) What role should Pakistan's institutions (including the military) play in elections? To frame the discussion, The Asia Foundation brought in outside experts, including keynote speaker Hasan-Askari Rizvi, a civil-military relations expert (and the 2006-7 Annual Pakistan Studies Scholar at John Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies); LTG (retired) Talat Masood; Dr. Mohammad Wasim (author of two books on elections); and Professor Tahir Amin (International Relations Department, Qaid-e-Azam University).

Make Some Initial Recommendations...

¶5. (C) The Asia Foundation Country Representative Hamid Sharif told poloffs that participants deemed the session a success and agreed on a number of election-related issues. The draft recommendations are still being transcribed, but once they are finished The Asia Foundation staff will circulate them to the participants. Program Officer Shahnawaz Mahmood told poloff he hopes the parties will

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decide to forward consensus recommendations to the Election Commission of Pakistan, but that is a step that the parties will have to take for themselves.

...And Then Ask To Meet Again

¶6. (C) At the end of the session, Senator Mushahid Hussain suggested that the group meet again to continue the discussion about institutions and civil-military relations (the next meeting is scheduled for February 10). Sharif said that he is optimistic about the prospects for future meetings, especially if they continue to happen outside the media's gaze. The low-profile environment, Sharif said, was a crucial element in generating real dialogue, rather than providing a platform for re-hashing stale political rhetoric. (Note: Sharif noted that most participants -- high-profile politicians who never met a press photographer they didn't like -- were stunned to find no/no media coverage of the event. As the dialogue progressed, however, they saw the utility of the low-profile strategy. End Note.)

Musharraf Gives Two Thumbs Up

¶7. (C) Sharif said he discussed the Asia Foundation initiative, which is co-funded by a number of donors, recently with President Musharraf. The President was supportive and said that the chosen candidates were a good group to initiate discussion. Musharraf also promised to encourage former Secretary of Defense Lieutenant General (Retired) Hamid Nawaz Khan to attend the next session to help participants come up with realistic solutions. Another key to success, Sharif said, will be enticing a greater number of influential representatives from the ruling Pakistan Muslim League to attend.

Dialogue Could Unstick Important Unresolved Issues

18. (C) Comment: Interparty dialogue is a critical prerequisite to improving the election process. This is not the first time we have seen the seeds of agreement. At a June 2006 dinner hosted by Ambassador Crocker (reftel), high-level representatives from both the ruling and opposition parties agreed on some basics: a free and fair process, a level playing ground for all parties, an Election Commission deemed strong and independent, a joint code of conduct, and the need to avoid political victimization of their opposition in the future.

19. (C) Comment, cont.: For the interparty dialogue at the Asia Foundation to meaningfully address long-standing election issues that are prickly and solvable, but stuck, the institutional venue for finally resolving such issues -- the Election Commission of Pakistan -- must function. Clearly, one of the most pressing issues from our perspective is that political parties and the Election Commission clearly do not know how to talk to one another to solve substantive problems. The forum may find a way to bridge that divide and post continues to press the Election Commission to engage with political parties. Whether the Asia Foundation is successful in encouraging the political parties to do any of this will depend on its skill as a moderator and the political parties' willingness to engage in a meaningful way -- especially the ruling Pakistan Muslim League. Post will continue to do what we can to support the process. End Comment.
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